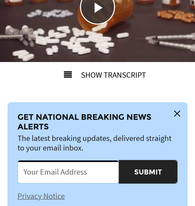

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US reaches record high of more than 96,000 drug overdose deaths in a 12-month period, CDC data show

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Virginia Langmaid, CNN

Reported drug overdose deaths in the United States hit a new high of more than 96,000 in the 12-month period ending March 2021, according to data released Wednesday by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

In that 12 months — a period when COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the United States and shut down normal daily routines — the U.S. saw 96,779 reported drug overdose deaths, an increase of 29.6% from March 2020 to March 2021. The numbers released Wednesday are provisional data, as drug overdose deaths require "lengthy investigation" to be recorded, according to the CDC.

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The CDC's estimate for predicted deaths, which accounts for delayed reporting, was over 99,000 from March 2020 to March 2021.

The numbers released on Wednesday show an increase over the number of drug overdose deaths reported during the 12-month period ending in February, but deaths have risen slightly slower. There was a 29.7% rise in reported drug overdose deaths between February 2020 and February 2021.

Three states saw their number of overdose deaths decline from March 2020 to March 2021: New Hampshire, New Jersey and South Dakota. South Dakota's reported overdose deaths declined by 16.3%, the highest of any state.

Vermont had the largest increase in overdose deaths of any state. Reported overdose deaths in Vermont rose 85.1% from March 2020 to March 2021. Vermont also saw the largest increase in the February dataset.

In the breakdown of CDC overdose death data by drug class, opioids accounted for the highest number of overdose deaths, followed by synthetic opioids excluding methadone. Methadone continued to see the lowest number of overdose deaths.

CDC warns a of 'substantial increase' in fatal drug overdoses coinciding with the pandemic

"It is important to remember that behind these devastating numbers are families, friends, and community members who are grieving the loss of loved ones," Regina LaBelle, acting director of the Executive Office of the President Office of National Drug Control Policy, said in a statement, urging Congress to fund President Biden's budget request to improve substance abuse prevention and treatment, among other efforts.

Last year saw the largest single-year increase in drug overdose deaths ever reported in the United States, with more than 93,000 deaths in 2020, the CDC said earlier this year — an increase of nearly 30% over 2019. At the time, Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, called the data "chilling," saying the pandemic "created a devastating collision of health crises in America."

"This has been an incredibly uncertain and stressful time for many people and we are seeing an increase in drug consumption, difficulty in accessing life-saving treatments for substance use disorders, and a tragic rise in overdose deaths," Volkow said earlier this year.

Wednesday's update covers one of the deadliest periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, where cases, hospitalizations and deaths surged from late last year and through the early months of 2021.

'Talk to your kids': Parents lose daughter to accidental overdose days before graduation

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